
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE
NEWS

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC
ADMINISTRATION

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NOAA 00-R106
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
February 24, 2000

Conservation Efforts Increase in Recreational Fishing Community

Saltwater recreational anglers continue to improve their conservation of marine fish through catch and release efforts, the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced today. From 1989 to 1998, the overall release rate by recreational anglers has increased from 45 percent to 57 percent. Recreational anglers also harvested an estimated 194.6 million pounds of marine finfish on nearly 62 million fishing trips in 1998.

"Although the recreational harvest is only about six percent of the total U.S. harvest of fish, it is important to managers because the fishing activities of millions of marine anglers are directed at relatively few species," said Mark Holliday, NOAA Fisheries division chief for statistics and economics. "More than half the total recreational harvest is made up of ten species of popular sport fish."

Recreational fishing data are collected nationwide by the Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey. NOAA Fisheries has been conducting the MRFSS survey since 1979 and relies on it to help management make informed decisions regarding sport fishing.

"We have seen a steady increase in the percentage of fish released by recreational anglers since the late eighties," said Holliday. "This increase is probably the combined result of stricter regulations for some species and a growing conservation awareness among anglers."

Officials at NOAA Fisheries said that in the case of Bluefish, the angling release rate has increased from 28 percent in 1989 to 55 percent in 1998. For the Atlantic's most valuable sport fish, striped bass, the release rate initially dropped from 97 percent in 1989 to 88 percent in 1990 when Maryland and Delaware lifted their striped bass moratoria. However, the release rate for striped bass then increased to between 89 percent and 93 percent (1991 through 1998). The increasing release rate occurred even though tremendously improved stocks caused regulations to become less restrictive during this period, resulting in increased bag limits and decreased size limits in many states.

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**TOP TEN RECREATIONAL SPECIES
1998 - (by harvest weight)**

	Lbs Harvested*	Total Number Caught**	% Total Catch Released Alive***
STRIPED BASS	13,463,000	16,881,077	91%
BLUEFISH	12,778,000	9,770,684	55%
SUMMER FLOUNDER	12,523,000	22,114,232	68%
DOLPHIN (MAHI MAHI)	12,113,000	2,061,930	9%
RED DRUM	9,850,000	7,670,678	72%
SPOTTED SEATROUT	9,544,000	22,486,935	66%
KING MACKEREL	8,721,000	1,146,270	16%
ATLANTIC CROAKER	8,213,000	22,755,028	56%
YELLOWTAIL	5,698,000	760,036	11%
YELLOWFIN TUNA	5,607,000	327,033	17%
TOP TEN TOTAL	98,510,000	105,973,903	66%

* Harvested" refers to any fish not released alive; including those brought home, used for bait, or released dead.

** "Caught" refers to the sum of all harvested fish and those released alive.

*** "% Total Catch Released" Refers to the Percentage of the Total Number of Fish Caught.

Of the states from Maine to Louisiana and Washington through California, Florida led in all measures of saltwater recreational fishing activity in 1998. Florida has led in numbers of participants and numbers of recreational saltwater fishing trips for the tenth straight year. Florida had more than 4.7 million marine anglers, including over two million out-of-state tourists. Together they took over 22.3 million recreational fishing trips in 1998.

California and North Carolina ranked second and third, respectively, in both the number of participants and the number of marine angling trips. New Hampshire ranked last in angling effort with 276,670 marine angling trips, and Georgia ranked last in angling participation with 115,156 marine anglers.

"The large number of participants and the concentrated harvest of few species are two of many reasons why the NOAA Fisheries conducts the recreational survey," said Holliday. "Without this data fishery managers would not have the information necessary to conserve recreationally important species and ensure quality marine angling for future generations."

Texas and Alaska are not currently included in the MRFSS because they conduct their own state surveys for saltwater recreational fisheries, and Hawaii, the western Pacific, and the Caribbean have not been included in the MRFSS since the early 1980s due to funding constraints.

A complete listing of saltwater angling fishing participation, effort, and catch data is available through the Web page (<http://www.st.nmfs.gov/st1/recreational>), Office of Science and Technology, Division of Fisheries Statistics and Economics.